

GULF OF MEXICO FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

The Commons at Rivergate

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Testimony of Bob Shipp, Chairman

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

Before

The Subcommittee on Oceans and Fisheries of

Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

New Orleans, Louisiana

December 14, 1999

Mr (Madame) Chairman and committee members:

My name is Bob Shipp, and I chair the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council.

It's an honor to speak to you. I offer a brief background on myself, so you'll know where I'm coming from. I hold a Ph.D. in fish biology, and have been a fishery scientist for more than 30 years. I chair the Department of Marine Sciences at the University of South Alabama, serve as a science consultant for the Alabama Coastal Conservation Association, and have been on the Gulf Council (twice it's chair) for eight and a half years. I fancy myself a great seafood chef, and my son, who really is a great professional chef, owns a fine dining restaurant in Mobile, serving primarily fresh seafood. I don't own the restaurant, only all the debt. Thus I have an academic, recreational, and commercial perspective on marine fishery resources.

I want to focus on but a single issue regarding reauthorization of SFA, and that is the relationship between the "intent of Congress," the "interpretation" of that intent by the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the resultant role and actions of the Councils.

During the last reauthorization phase, Congress passed some truly laudable changes in the SFA, aimed at preventing collapse of severely over fished stocks as well as continuing the rebuilding of those stocks that had bottomed out and were on the road to recovery. The goal, of course, was to ultimately reach a level of optimal productivity and sustainability, for which the principle of MSY (maximum sustainable yield) was adopted.

However, put briefly, the implementation of those changes, through the "Guidelines" developed by the NMFS have proven totally unrealistic and practically impossible to achieve. I believe the "Guidelines" did not reflect the intent of Congress, but rather a theoretical exercise in fisheries management to test the

validity of various simulation models. This, combined with a strict literal legal interpretation of these guidelines, has forced the Councils to enact management measures that have imposed severe hardship on practically every user group and stakeholder, at least in the Gulf region.

I will cite but a couple of examples to demonstrate, but am prepared to offer many more if requested.

First, if the biology of a stock is such that rebuilding can occur within ten years, then, according to NMFS Guidelines, all means necessary must be taken to accomplish this. All means necessary includes a total moratorium on harvest of any type. Did Congress intend that a stock that can be rebuilt in, say, eight years, must be rebuilt in eight years, with total cessation of all harvest, even if an entire economy, recreational, commercial, and associated industries be destroyed? I don't think so. If rebuilding in, say, twelve years would accomplish the same rebuilding objectives but with minimal economic impact, would that not be Congress' intent?

Second, (an issue close to home), the rebuilding of red snapper stocks. This is a difficult and complex issue, but let me reduce it to the problem of the projected MSY. Depending on which model one employs, the Bmsy (biomass needed to support maximum MSY) is from 2 to 4 billion pounds, and the annual MSY well over 100,000,000 pounds. But never in the history of that fishery has the yield approached even one fifth of that number, even in the nineteenth century when it was virtually a virgin stock. Nevertheless, the draconian measures necessary to attain this theoretical goal (in about the year 2033) would cut the current yield by more than half, and virtually eliminate the fishery, both commercial and recreational, as we know it, and in the process cost the associated coastal tourist industry well over a \$100,000,000 annually. To the credit of the Council's Stock Assessment Panel and the Council itself, the lack of the appropriate stock/recruit relationship for red snapper has been recognized, and projections based on better studied stocks have been used as proxies, giving a somewhat more realistic scenario. But even this will be invalid when the more stringent NMFS interpretation for MSY under the "Guidelines" is put in place. Incidentally, red snapper stocks have been improving for almost a decade with the less stringent measures that are currently in place.

For this most fundamental problem, I think the solution is simple. The Councils and congressional staffers, as well as NMFS, all need to be involved in interpretation of Congressional intent. The “Guidelines” should be a product of these groups to avoid placing the Councils in the untenable role of implementing impossible management measures.

My time is up, but I would be pleased to elaborate or answer any questions you may have.